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SUBJECT: A DAY AT THE POLLS IN GEORGIA

## Introduction

1. (U) Twenty teams of U.S. Embassy observers spread out across Georgia on January 5 to observe the presidential election from the opening of polls to the completion of the count late into the night.

In addition to providing material for our reports on the conduct and the results of the election, this gave Embassy officers from a variety of sections and agencies an opportunity to see Georgian civic life up close, often in remote or overlooked areas. As a supplement to our other reporting on the election, the Embassy offers in this cable a collection of some of the interesting incidents and people we encountered. While the details are particular to one time and place, taken together they provide some context on contemporary Georgian life and politics. End Introduction.

## Team 1: Tbilisi

2. (SBU) To observe closing of the polls and ballot counting, Team 1 decided to re-visit the precinct that appeared to us to be the most disorganized earlier in the day. At 7:30 pm we returned to the "Opizari Joint Stock Company" building in a working class neighborhood of Tbilisi. We arrived just in time to see an elderly woman, probably in her 70's, attempt to vote by way of the additional list but she was turned away for not having proper ID. The woman protested that she was an IDP (internally displaced person) from Abkhazia and thus could not register through her residence. The unsympathetic election commission secretary said that she needed to provide proof of her IDP status. The woman left quietly, but returned triumphant, panting from rushing up the stairs, with her IDP card in hand. She dropped her red envelope into the ballot box just beating the clock at 8:00 pm and was rewarded with 2 thumbs up by our team.

3. (SBU) In the unheated, smoke-filled room, the ballot counting commenced shortly after closing at 8:00 pm in below-freezing temperatures. A frail gray-haired woman in an enormous fur coat carefully opened each ballot and announced the contents, proceeding excruciatingly slowly until the last envelope was opened at 3:00 am. At that point, several incomplete ballots had to be considered by the precinct commission. The commission was split along party lines and accusations of partisanship were flying. Six or so commissioners engaged in an hour-long shouting match over whether to count one ballot which was signed next to Saakashvili's name, rather than circled. When the shouting reached fever pitch, the police officer stationed outside entered the room and approached our team. He had a worried look on his face and said to our interpreter, "shouldn't you intervene?" After we asked the Chair about the essence of the argument, the shouting stopped, the room became silent, and a ballot was thrust in front of us for decision. When we explained that it was not our place to interpret ballots, the commissioners rolled their eyes and the arguing ensued unabated.

## Team 6: Tbilisi

4. (SBU) In a polling station in Isani (Avlabari) located in an old

Vodka factory, voters queued outside the building in the freezing cold. The polling station was in the lobby of the factory and there was no space inside for voters to wait. But, the temperature inside was no warmer than on the street. Team 6 was at the polling station when several visually impaired people from a near-by home for the blind came to vote. The people in line made way for the blind voters, many of them elderly, and helped them up the crowded, broken stairs and into the station. People continued to make way while they held onto each other and helped them to the registration desk, to the voting booths and then to the ballot box.

#### Team 16: Svaneti Region

15. (SBU) Team 16 arrived in this remote mountain region after a harrowing six-hour drive through snowy mountain passes, creeping along barely passable roads. To observe the closing of the polls and vote counting, Team 16 returned to one of Mestia's two main precincts. Shortly after the team members sat down, they were joined by a local English-speaking middle-aged lady who claimed to be an OSCE observer. (Other locals later told us that she was not actually associated with the OSCE.) This lady made a point of extolling the virtues of Georgia's various alcoholic drinks, particularly Svaneti's brand of cha-cha -- a drink that precinct workers had already forced on the observers in an earlier visit to the polling station. After chatting with Team 16's sole unmarried male for a few moments, the lady walked out of the room and quickly returned with her young adult daughter, whom she enthusiastically offered to him as a wife. The embarrassed observer hemmed and hawed for a moment, before the (equally embarrassed) daughter disappeared.

16. (SBU) After the votes were counted and the protocol signed at approximately 12:30 am, Team 16 returned to its guesthouse to find the owner's nephew awake by the fireplace. The nephew explained that he had been waiting for the team to return safely, and that if they had not returned by 2:00 am, he would have gone out into the

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night to look for them and bring them back to the guesthouse. This gracious, typically Georgian concern for guests was further demonstrated by the guesthouse owner's comment that Mestia's police made a point of patrolling her street whenever she had foreign guests, to ensure their safety and well-being.

TEFFT